

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) An instant messaging system comprising:

an electronic assistant to handle instant messages sent from a first user to an instant message program of a second user when the second user is away or offline, wherein the assistant is configured to:

~~receives~~ receive a first instant message from the first user;

in response to the first instant message, ~~sends~~ send the first user an instant message that indicates that the second user is away or offline;

~~receives~~ receive a second instant message from the first user, wherein the second instant message contains a request that the electronic assistant take an action related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

in response to the request, ~~takes~~ take the requested action.

2. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein:

the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user for delivery to the second user;

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to take ~~takes~~ the message from the first user for delivery to the second user; and

the assistant is configured to forward ~~forwards~~ the message to the second user.

3. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein:

the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the away

or offline status of the second user; and

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to send ~~sends~~ the first user an instant message containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

4. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored information about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user.

5. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 4 wherein:  
the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to send ~~sends~~ the first user an instant message containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of the second user is based, at least in part, on the stored information about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user.

6. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 4 wherein:

the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user for delivery to the second user;

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to take ~~takes~~ the message from the first user for delivery to the second user; and

the assistant is configured to forward ~~forwards~~ the message to the second user; ~~and the message is forwarded~~ based, at least in part, on the stored information about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user.

7. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant is configured to access ~~aeesses~~ stored calendar information for the second user.
8. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 7 wherein:  
the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;  
the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to send ~~sends~~ the first user an instant message containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and  
the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of the second user is based, at least in part, on the stored calendar information.
9. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 7 wherein:  
the requested action includes having the assistant take ~~assiste taking~~ a message from the first user for delivery to the second user;  
the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to take ~~takes~~ the message from the first user for delivery to the second user; and  
the assistant is configured to forward ~~forwards~~ the message to the second user; ~~and the message is forwarded~~ based, at least in part, on the stored calendar information.
10. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant is configured to access ~~aeesses~~ stored information about other ways of contacting the second user.
11. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 10 wherein:  
the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;  
the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to send ~~sends~~ the first user an instant message containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of the second user is based, at least in part on the stored information about other ways of contacting the second user.

12. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 10 wherein:

the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user for delivery to the second user;

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to take ~~takes~~ the message from the first user for delivery to the second user; and

the assistant is configured to forward ~~forwards~~ the message to the second user; ~~and the message is forwarded~~ based, at least in part, on the stored information about other ways of contacting the second user.

13. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 wherein:

the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;

the assistant, to take the requested action, is configured to send ~~sends~~ the first user an instant message containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of the second user is based, at least in part, on a trust level for the first user.

14. (Currently Amended) An electronic assistant configured to handle instant messages sent from a first user to an instant message program of a second user when the second user is away or offline, the assistant comprising:

a natural language interface component configured to perform processing on an instant message to determine if the instant message is requesting that the electronic assistant take an action related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

a response component configured to generate ~~determine~~ and send a response to an

the instant message if the natural language interface component determines that the instant message is requesting that the electronic assistant take an action related to the away or offline status of the second user, wherein the response is related to the requested action.

15. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;

~~the response component determines and sends a response that~~ includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the response component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored information about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user to ~~determine~~ generate the response that includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

16. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;

~~the response component determines and sends a response that~~ includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the response component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored calendar information for the second user to ~~determine~~ generate the response that includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

17. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;

~~the response component determines and sends a response that~~ includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

the response component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored information about other

ways of contacting the second user to ~~determine~~ generate the response that includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

18. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 14 wherein:  
the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or offline status of the second user;  
the ~~response component determines and sends a response that~~ includes information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and  
the ~~response that includes~~ information related to the away or offline status of the second user is based, at least in part, on a trust level for the first user.
19. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 14 wherein the action includes taking a message from the first user for delivery to the second user and the assistant further comprises a message component configured to forward a message left by the first user for delivery to the second user according to a determination of when and to where the message should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message.
20. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored information about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message.
21. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored calendar information for the second user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message.
22. (Currently Amended) The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component is configured to access ~~accesses~~ stored information about other ways of contacting the second

user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message.

23. (Currently Amended) A method of handling instant messages sent to an away or offline user, the method comprising:

receiving an instant messages message sent to the away or offline user from a first user;  
processing the instant message received from the first user to determine if the instant message indicates that the first user wants to leave a message for the away or offline user;  
~~in response to at least one of the instant messages requesting information related to the away or offline status of the away or offline user, providing, to the first user, information related to the away or offline status of the away or offline user;~~  
if the processing results in a determination that the instant message indicates that the first user wants to leave a message for the away or offline user:

~~receiving~~ accessing a message left by the first user for delivery to the away or offline user;

determining when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message; and

forwarding the message according to the determination of when and to where the message should be forwarded.

24. (Canceled)

25. (Canceled)

26. (Canceled)

27. (Canceled)

28. (Original) The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about recent history of away and/or offline status of the away or offline user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second away or offline user to receive the message.
29. (Original) The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored calendar information for the away or offline user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the away or offline user to receive the message.
30. (Original) The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about other ways of contacting the away or offline user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the away or offline user to receive the message.